Rural-Located Institutions and Rural-Serving Institutions: What We Know and Where We Go from Here

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Rurality—that is, living in, working in, or hailing from rural spaces—is embedded in the fabric of the United States. The Census Bureau (2017b) notes that 97 percent of U.S. land is classified as rural and serves as home to over 19 percent of the U.S. population—almost 60 million Americans. Such rural regions still hold the same benefits and appeal that they have for years by providing citizens with small, tight-knit communities; offering more physical space across the country for residents to live and work; and supplying much of the U.S. with agricultural and manufacturing goods. Yet the profile of rural America is different from that of prior centuries, as rural communities and populations have changed and adapted to modern times.

These changes are represented in the social demography of the rural U.S. Overall, the U.S. population has grown over the past 100 years. Urban areas have contributed to much of this population increase; from 1910 to 2010, the populations of metropolitan regions grew by almost 500 percent, while the increase in rural areas was only 19 percent (EPA 2022). Further still—for the first time in recorded history—two-thirds of nonmetropolitan counties saw a population decrease, with rural population numbers declining by 289,000 from 2010 to 2022 (-0.6 percent) (Johnson 2022). Some rural regions in the West, Southeast, and Northeast increased their population counts; population losses, on the other hand, were more substantial in the Great Plains, Corn Belt, Mississippi Delta, and Northern Appalachians regions as well as in agricultural and industrial areas of New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois (Johnson 2022). In some regions, the population increased or declined more slowly than the overall rate, largely due to increased racial and ethnic diversity stemming from minoritized people of color, especially Latinx people, as well as immigrants moving into rural areas (Ajilore and Willingham 2019; Pohl 2017; Johnson 2006; Slack and Jensen 2020). Although White people still represent the largest percentage of people in the rural U.S., these demographic shifts counter the popular narrative that the rural U.S. is synonymous with White.

Rural America is also in flux related to industry and the economy. While one might think of agriculture and manufacturing industries driving most jobs in the rural U.S., service-related industries, including food and health care, are also a key component of rural regions. Whatever the field, rural America generally has working class labor markets that do not typically require employees to hold a postsecondary credential (Tieken 2016). Many jobs within these markets are part of working-class industries that pay limited wages (e.g., service, such as health care and food) or that are declining in modern society (e.g., agriculture and manufacturing) (Ajilore and Willingham 2019; Brown and Schafft 2011; Johnson 2006; Wood 2008). Dependence on these lower-paying and declining jobs creates persistently high rates of deep poverty in rural regions (Ajilore and Willingham 2019; Save the Children 2018; Tickamyer, Sherman, and Warlick 2017; USDA 2023).

Rural areas have encountered changing social demographics as well as industrial and economic instability, yet relatively little is known about how these changes impact higher education. Much of this lack of knowledge can be attributed to the concept of rurality being marginalized for decades from education research, practice, and policy (Lavalley 2018; Schafft 2016; Schafft and Biddle 2014). Such marginalization is particularly apparent in higher education literature as well as practice and policy efforts (Davis, Watts, and Ajinkya 2019; Thier et al. 2021). In recent years, however, rurality has received more attention as a topic of interest for a variety of postsecondary education stakeholders. In particular, rural areas were thrust into the national spotlight following the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Media covering the election highlighted a rural group of voters with power over the electorate (Evich 2016; Kurtzleben 2016;

Newburger 2018). While there are complexities and sometimes misconceptions communicated through such broad perceptions, that election at least catalyzed discussions on rural regions (Adamy and Overberg 2017; Wuthnow 2018). These deliberations often centered on rural areas and education; in particular, rural citizens' and communities' long-term lack of access to postsecondary opportunities were a focus (Belkin 2017; Marcus and Krupnick 2017; Pappano 2017; Smith 2017).

Postsecondary research, practice, and policy that were specifically related to rurality followed, seemingly bolstered by these conversations and more. Scholars published on rural populations' experiences, access, and success in higher education (Ardoin 2018; Ganss 2016; Hillman and Weichman 2016; Koricich, Chen, and Hughes 2018; McNamee 2019; Means et al. 2016; Sansone, Sparks, and Cano-McCutcheon 2020). Institutions increased intentional recruitment of rural students (Jaschik 2017), and new programs—including the University of Georgia's ALL Georgia program—strengthened financial aid to rural students. State policy, such as the University of North Carolina System's 2017 Strategic Performance Agreements, focused on rural student enrollment. On the federal level, through Executive Order 13790 issued by President Trump, the Task Force on Agriculture and Rural Prosperity was created to focus on issues facing rural America, including its postsecondary degree attainment (Perdue 2017). U.S. senators introduced the Success for Rural Students and Communities Act of 2020, which described its Rural Postsecondary and Economic Development Grant program as a federal initiative created to "increase enrollment and graduation rates of secondary school graduates and nontraditional students from rural areas at 2-year and 4-year institutions of higher education" (U.S. Congress 2020).

Scholarship and practice and policy efforts around increasing postsecondary enrollment and attainment for rural students are important to understanding the topic of rurality in higher education, especially given that rural schools educate over 9.3 million students (Showalter et al. 2019). In focusing so particularly on rural students, however, a key aspect of rurality related to postsecondary education has been frequently overlooked: an institutional perspective. In other words, a consideration of how institutions of higher education are a part of or connect with rural communities. Scholars have begun to examine these ideas at the institutional level, discussing colleges and universities located in or near rural areas (referred to herein as "rural-located institutions" (RLIs)) (Hillman et al. 2021), as well as colleges and universities enrolling large numbers of rural populations and offering degrees that are unique and helpful to rural regions and industries (referred to as "rural-serving institutions" (RSIs)) (Koricich et al. 2022). As to practice and policy, there are postsecondary institutions as well as state and federal policymakers that have supported rural communities for many years. Even with rurality-focused research and efforts, compared with other areas of scholarship, practice, and policy, the topic of rurality in higher education from an institutional perspective remains relatively new. In turn, it proves difficult to understand and support institutions that are connected to and engaged with rural communities and people. This is to the detriment of the over 500 RLIs (Hillman et al. 2021) and almost 1,100 RSIs that exist in the U.S. (Koricich et al. 2022), which enroll millions of students, employ countless faculty and staff, and respond to the needs of rural regions and populations.

This discussion paper seeks to recognize and consider rurality in higher education from an institutional perspective, using research, practice, and policy lenses to explore the two types of postsecondary institutions that are connected to rural communities in the U.S.: RLIs and RSIs. After reviewing and discussing scholarly, practice, and policy literature related to RLIs and RSIs, this paper concludes by stating how higher education organizations can work to further understand and support RLIs and RSIs through research, practice, and policy efforts.

ISSUES RELATED TO RLIs AND RSIs

Definitions of RLIs and RSIs

Rurality can be difficult to define. Numerous governmental entities and organizations have developed and use varying definitions of what is meant by rural. Furthermore, rural areas are not monolithic, possessing much social and economic diversity within and across regions (Ajilore and Willingham 2019; Koricich 2012). That being said, most rural regions have particular characteristics that can define them as being uniquely rural. The U.S. Census Bureau classifies rural areas as home to "sparse populations" that has lower population density per square mile (Ratcliffe et al. 2016, 4). Additionally, rural regions have fewer buildings and residences and are located at far distances from urban areas (Ratcliffe et al. 2016).

RLIs are found within or close to rural regions. Simply put, RLIs are postsecondary institutions that are either physically located in areas defined as rural or are in commuting zones with multiple counties clustered together but accessible to people from urban, suburban, and—central to this paper—rural populations (Hillman et al. 2021). RLIs can be more traditional colleges and universities, typically classified by systems such as the Carnegie Classifications system and the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), but they may also include other entities offering postsecondary education opportunities (Hillman et al. 2021).

While RLIs are defined almost exclusively by their location, RSIs (termed by Koricich (2018) and Koricich et al. (2022)) are somewhat more complex in scope. Koricich and colleagues brought the term RSI to larger-scale use in their 2022 report, which identified and introduced the country's institutions that serve rural communities and populations. These researchers outlined a multivariable definition of RSIs. This definition considered rural location but, using U.S. Census and USDA Economic Research Service data, examined the percent of the institution's residing county population classified as rural; the average percent of counties adjacent to the institution classified as rural; the population size of the institution's residing county; and the adjacency of the institution's residing county to a metro area. Moving beyond location, the scholars also incorporated into their definition a variable regarding the percent of the institution's total credentials awarded in fields that are often unique to and predominant in rural areas, including agriculture, natural resources, and parks and recreation. Considering these variables together, RSIs are defined by the rurality of the location(s) around them, the extent to which they enroll rural populations, and by how much they engage in academic offerings that serve rural regions.

For research, practice, and policy efforts, it is helpful to understand what constitutes RLIs and RSIs. As seen from these definitions, RLIs and RSIs are connected in some ways, as both types of institutions are related to rural populations and communities. Both can be situated within rural regions or commuting zones that are accessible to rural populations; they may also work to serve rural communities and areas. At times, an institution may even be classified as both an RLI and an RSI. Yet it is important to acknowledge the differences between the two. RLIs represent only those postsecondary institutions and learning centers that are *located in or accessible to* rural areas. RSIs can be located anywhere but still be shown to *serve* rural communities and populations, whether through degree offerings or enrollment of rural students. Not all RLIs are RSIs, and vice versa. By understanding the links and the differences between the two classifications, researchers, practitioners, and policymakers will be able to target their work more specifically and also be inclusive of institutions that are connected to and engaged with the rural U.S.

Types of RLIs and RSIs

The discussion around rural-related institutions (encompassing both RLIs and RSIs) has most often centered on rural community colleges. For example, the first institutions that were designated by the Carnegie Classifications as being located in rural, urban, or suburban areas were community colleges (Hardy and Katsinas 2007; Katsinas and Hardy 2012; Kennamer and Katsinas 2011).[1] Even higher education membership organizations, such as the Rural

1 In recent years, the Carnegie Classifications system has stopped classifying community colleges in such a way. There has been no public explanation provided as to why this change occurred.

Community College Alliance, have seen the need to bring together rural two-year institutions around issues and initiatives relevant to such colleges. This focus on rural associate degree-granting institutions makes some sense, as 263 community colleges in the U.S. are rural-located (Hillman et al. 2021) and over half of two-year public institutions around the country are classified as RSIs (Koricich et al. 2022).

However, in focusing so predominantly on rural community colleges, scholars have noted that other types of institutions are left out of the RLI/RSI conversation. Overall, data show that 253 non-associate institutions, both public and private, are located in rural areas (Hillman et al. 2021). Additionally, 33 percent of all private four-year institutions and 46 percent of public four-year institutions in the U.S. are RSIs. Among these RLIs and RSIs, there are several types of postsecondary institutions. For example, many land-grant institutions, whose missions may focus on serving the public and offering degrees in rural-focused areas such as agriculture are often located in larger towns, suburban spaces, or even urban areas but still serve rural populations (Koricich et al. 2022). Regional, comprehensive institutions are known to serve as hubs of enrollment and support in rural regions, yet they are often overlooked in higher education discussions (Koricich et al. 2020; McClure et al. 2021). Further, many RLIs and RSIs are minority serving institutions (Cunningham, Park, and Engle 2014; Hillman et al. 2021; Koricich et al. 2022), with Koricich's team (2022) noting that around one-third of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), 18 percent of Hispanic-Serving Institutions, and 93 percent of Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) are classified as RSIs. Dual mission institutions—those that offer more than one type of degree (e.g., certificate, two-year degree, and four-year degree)—can also be classified as RLIs or RSIs. These dual mission institutions are often in or near rural areas and states with smaller populations; they educate multiple communities, offer many credential options, and provide a seamless transition between postsecondary credentials (Carruth 2019; Griffin 2021; Schindelheim 2022). Dual mission institutions also are similar to regional comprehensive institutions in that they remain rooted in the rural areas to which they are connected and therefore provide curricular offerings that will hopefully be useful in the local community employment markets (Griffin 2021).

Modern higher education also exists beyond traditional brick-and-mortar colleges and universities. Both recent reports from the Student Success Through Applied Research Lab at the University of Wisconsin–Madison (Hillman et al. 2021) and the Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges (ARRC) (Koricich et al. 2022) utilized IPEDS data to find institutions' home locations and analyze their rurality. The ARRC team relied solely on IPEDS to find institutions of higher education in the U.S., while Hillman's SSTAR Lab group merged IPEDS data with the U.S. Department of Education's Database of Accredited Postsecondary Institutions and Programs. In doing so, Hillman et al. described how they were able to find main institutions, branch campuses of institutions, and "additional locations" of postsecondary offerings—such as administrative and extension offices, corrections spaces, K–12 education settings, military bases, and private companies. Through merging data in such a way, the researchers note that they were able to examine more thoroughly which RLIs are available in which rural populations could study. In fact, among nontraditional postsecondary offerings, rural areas were overrepresented relative to nonrural locations. That being said, Hillman's group was not able to dive as deeply into curricular offerings, student characteristics, and support services because many of the locations in the DAPIP database did not have entries in IPEDS to compare against other institutions. Additionally, since rural regions are often located far from in-person higher education opportunities, the role of online education in rural communities should not be underestimated (Hillman and Weichman 2016). While access to high-speed internet remains a prominent issue for rural communities (FCC 2019), rural public colleges have in the past 10 years increased their numbers of undergraduates and graduate students pursuing partially or fully online programs (McClure et al. 2021).

It is evident that there are many kinds of RLIs and RSIs in the U.S., including community colleges, land-grant universities, regional institutions, minority serving institutions, and dual mission institutions, as well as less traditional forms of higher education. These colleges and universities are bonded over the fact that they are located in or by rural areas, serve rural areas, or both, and are tackling issues such areas encounter. Yet, at the same time, they hold distinct missions and engage in unique activities depending upon institution type. Such factors should be considered when working to support and engage with RLIs and RSIs.

Location of RLIs and RSIs

Looking across both Hillman et al.'s (2021) report and the mapping tool released by ARRC (2022) in correspondence with Koricich et al.'s 2022 report, one can see that RLIs and/or RSIs reside across many states and geographic regions in the U.S. Just as there is great variety among RLIs and RSIs, these institutions are located within diverse range of rural areas across the country and face overlapping but distinct issues. For example, some RLIs/RSIs are located in rural regions that are experiencing population losses due to out-migration (Koricich and Fryar 2022). Some areas such as the plains, the Southwest, and parts of Alaska are encountering greater net migration loss than other rural locations; meanwhile, rural eastern and western coastal locales are experiencing the greatest growth in population, relative to other rural areas (Hillman et al. 2021). Further, due to hosting many low-paying or declining industries rural areas also face some of the highest rates of poverty in the U.S., surpassing even those in urban regions (Ajilore and Willingham 2019; Save the Children 2018; USDA 2023). That being said, such poverty can show up differently across rural locales. For example, many rural African American populations in the southeastern regions of the U.S. face higher rates of poverty compared with other rural areas, given the long-term effects of racist Jim Crow laws (Ajilore and Willingham 2019).

Different regions can also host broadly different employment opportunities. As mentioned earlier, many rural areas remain economically reliant upon service (e.g., food and health care), natural resources, agriculture, and manufacturing industries. Yet these markets can look different across rural spaces (Ajilore and Willingham 2019). For example, we know that food and health care offerings vary widely across the country. In the agricultural sector, food crop production dominates areas of the Southwest, the Midwest, and the South (USDA, n.d.) Within the industries focused on natural resources, Wyoming and West Virginia lead the country in coal production, (EIA 2023), yet oil production is immense in states such as Texas, Alaska, California, North Dakota, and Oklahoma (Vehicle Technologies Office 2012). Different regions are also responsible for the manufacturing and distribution of goods around the U.S. and beyond.

It is important to consider the nuances across rural spaces within the U.S. RLIs and RSIs may be within, near to, or connected to rural communities that are experiencing population loss, but some experience exacerbated effects of that out-migration. Poverty rates deeply affect rural regions connected to RLIs and RSIs but can have more intensive effects on certain rural communities. In addition, industries can look different in rural locales, depending on the state and region. Just as with type of institution, considering such location-based nuances will be important when discussing RLIs and RSIs.

Roles of RLIs and RSIs

RLIs and RSIs serve and engage with rural communities in multiple ways. First and foremost, scholars studying such institutions detail how RLIs and RSIs provide postsecondary education opportunities to rural communities (McClure et al. 2021; Orphan and McClure 2019). Rural students continue to be some of the least likely to enroll in and complete college, especially compared with suburban students and also related to bachelor's degrees overall (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center 2022; Wells et al. 2019). Individuals in rural locales also tend to have the lowest educational attainment, as compared with any other geographic region (NCES 2022a).

These rates are a product of multiple factors. Many students, rural included, want to attend college close to home (Stolzenberg et al. 2020), but rural populations remain physically distant from postsecondary education options (Hillman and Weichman 2016; Hebel and Smallwood 2019). Rural community cultures can at times value pursuing work over expensive education, especially because rural areas face entrenched poverty (Tieken 2016). Even when rural populations want to pursue higher education, postsecondary environments are rife with cultural values and norms that can be confusing and burdensome to rural families and students (Ardoin 2018). If rural students do make it to campuses, they find academically, socially, and professionally overwhelming environments (Ganss 2016; Heinisch 2017; Schultz 2004) that do not always align with or understand the backgrounds of rural students (Davis, Watts, and Ajinkya 2019; McDonough, Gildersleeve, and Jarsky 2010).

RLIs and RSIs combat barriers by providing higher education options to rural populations. Public, private, and for-profit RLIs enroll over 1.6 million students, with community colleges hosting an average of approximately 2,300 students each, bachelor's/master's institutions an average of around 2,600 students each, and doctoral-granting institutions an average of almost 11,600 students each (Hillman et al. 2021). A little over 4.7 million students are enrolled at RSIs (Koricich et al. 2022), with community colleges enrolling around 1,300,000 students, bachelor's institutions approximately 430,000, master's institutions a little over 661,000 students, and doctoral-granting institutions around 2,400,000.

Through offering higher education opportunities to rural populations, RLIs and RSIs enroll students who are often the most underserved and marginalized in both postsecondary spaces and in the U.S. The populations that RLIs and RSIs serve are often those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Katsinas and Hardy 2012). For example, the communities that RLIs are located in or near and enrolling students from often have lower educational attainment, lower incomes per capita, and higher child poverty rates than their nonrural counterparts (Hillman et al. 2021; McClure et al. 2021). RSIs enroll students from low socioeconomic backgrounds as well, hosting comparatively higher percentages of students who receive Pell Grants than non-RSIs do (Koricich et al. 2022). RLIs are more likely to have an older student population and are thus better positioned to serve adult learners (Hillman et al. 2021). Koricich and colleagues (2022) note that RSIs, especially rural public institutions, enroll many adult learners and comparatively larger shares of part-time enrollees who are usually pursuing higher education while balancing other life priorities. Further, RLIs and RSIs have particular ties to military learner education; military members disproportionately come from rural areas (Tyson 2005) and nearly one-quarter of veterans—about five million individuals—live in rural areas (U.S. Census Bureau 2017a). Hillman et al.'s (2021) work showcases how postsecondary learning takes place for learners on military bases and at military academies in and near rural areas. RSIs also engage in military learner education. For example, institutions such as the University of Maine at Presque Isle cultivate partnerships with community leaders and organizations. One partnership is the Maine Military and Community Network, "which acts as a resource hub for active service members, veterans, and their families" (McClure et al. 2021, 21).

In addition to issues of age, social class, and military status, RLIs and RSIs serve people of color in unique ways. While the populations within RLI regions are predominantly White, there are also higher percentages of Native and Indigenous students in these regions when compared with nonrural areas (Hillman et al. 2021). Additionally, many TCUs are located in rural regions (Cunningham, Park, and Engle 2014). In fact, 90 percent of public bachelor's degree-granting TCUs and 88 percent of broadly accessible Native American-Serving Nontribal Institutions reside in rural areas (McClure et al. 2021). RSIs also enroll higher numbers of Native and Indigenous students (Koricich et al. 2022). Further, given the large numbers of HBCUs and high Black-enrolling colleges and universities that are also RSIs, such institutions offer postsecondary education to Black students.

RLIs and RSIs also meet rural community needs beyond enrollment. As mentioned, RSIs are defined in part by their dedication to offering credentials in fields useful to rural areas, such as agriculture and natural resources. In turn, students at these institutions can take such credentials back to rural communities and use their knowledge to give back economically and socially. This reciprocity is particularly salient for high-need rural communities with low levels of college attainment, in which returning rural students have shown to make an impact (Sowl, Smith, and Brown 2022). Additionally, RLIs and RSIs themselves offer economic boosts to local economies. Around 83 percent of higher education institutions in low-employment counties are classified as RSIs (Koricich et al. 2022). RSIs offer work opportunities to rural areas already facing issues around finding employment (Koricich and Fryar 2022; McClure et al. 2021). Beyond employment, RLIs and RSIs offer cultural activities and events as well as health care, education, and business services and knowledge to the communities in which they reside (Fluharty and Scaggs 2007; Koricich and Fryar 2022; McClure et al. 2021; Orphan and McClure 2019). Scholars note that faculty, staff, and students offer financial boosts to rural communities through their economic activity in rural college and university towns (Orphan and McClure 2019).

RLIs and RSIs enroll millions of students, offering postsecondary options to many rural populations who face some of the direst college enrollment and attainment rates in the country. These enrollees are underserved and marginalized not only due to their rural backgrounds but also around social class, race, and ethnicity. In addition to enrolling students from those populations, RLIs and RSIs serve the rural communities to which they are connected. This service is represented through degrees offered that benefit rural communities and through providing work to individuals in low-employment counties. Further, RLIs and RSIs provide economic, cultural, health care, and educational boosts to local communities through their services, resources, and knowledge. The multifaceted ways that RLIs and RSIs serve rural populations and greater communities should be considered when determining how best to support such colleges and universities.

Resources of RLIs and RSIs

While RLIs and RSIs serve a great variety of purposes related to rural populations and communities, they often do so with fewer resources and smaller budgets than those of other postsecondary institutions (Koh et al. 2019; McClure et al. 2021). Issues around institutional resources are particularly striking for rural-located community colleges and regional public institutions, which generate less revenue and funding dollars than other institutions overall but are allocated comparatively fewer state and federal funding dollars (Fluharty and Scaggs 2007; Koh et al. 2019; McClure et al. 2021). These issues are heightened by the lack of financial resources in local rural economies, which already deal with issues of poverty and low employment and are thus not able to provide as much financial support for higher education as other geographic regions. RSIs also encounter difficulties around financial resources. Rural-serving colleges and universities generally remain reliant upon state appropriations, given that they receive less funding overall from tuition and fees, grants and contracts, and philanthropy (Koricich et al. 2022; McClure and Fryar 2020; McClure et al. 2021).

Additionally, state appropriations to higher education have decreased across time. For example, McClure et al.'s (2021) analyses of IPEDS data found that state appropriations in 2008 represented 35 percent of rural public colleges' funding per student; however, state appropriations in 2018 accounted for only 29 percent of such funding.[2] The same has been found for rural community colleges across time. IPEDS analyses from Koh and colleagues (2019) found that for all rural community colleges, state appropriations accounted for a smaller percentage of total revenue from 2003–04 to 2013–14. Over that 10-year period, small rural community colleges saw the amount of total revenue from state appropriations decline from 42 percent to 38 percent, medium rural community colleges from 36 percent to 31 percent, and large rural community colleges from 28 percent to 24 percent.

The reliance of RLIs and RSIs on state appropriations relative to other revenue sources means that those institutions experience particularly negative effects related to those funding cuts. These issues were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which greatly impacted both the revenue sources and the already financially strapped rural institutions (McClure et al. 2021). RLIs and RSIs often need more funding than other institutions, yet they are generally provided with fewer resources to operate—all of which create a multitude of issues for such institutions.

RLIs AND RSIs IN A CONTINUOUSLY GLOBALIZING SOCIETY

While there are of course exceptions and rural America is more diverse than mainstream conversations often acknowledge, rural areas trend more homogenous in their demographics and are made up of small, tight-knit networks of individuals who grew up or live and work in such areas, or both. Given these demographic and social characteristics of rural regions, it may come as no surprise that postsecondary institutions in such areas do not engage in internationalization efforts to the same extent as nonrural institutions. The American Council on Education's (ACE) *Mapping Internationalization on U.S. Campuses: 2022 Edition* identified that institutions located in urban areas reported higher levels of internationalization than those in rural locales. That report also shared that rural institutions tended to have comparatively fewer policies or resources dedicated toward global engagement (Soler, Kim, and Cecil 2022). These

2 All numbers have been adjusted for inflation.

findings echo previous scholarship findings that rural community colleges reported lower internationalization efforts than urban and suburban institutions (Harder 2010).

There is not currently sufficient scholarship to offer concrete reasoning behind the rates of internationalization and global engagement at rural institutions. We know that RLIs and RSIs often focus on serving local rural populations, so they may not see internationalization efforts—especially international recruitment—as central to their missions. RLIs and RSIs also face continued shortages in funding and resources; in turn, they may not have enough funding and staff to foster such efforts. This idea is backed by ACE's report, which outlined that "81 percent of rural institutions reported not receiving any external funding for internationalization" (Soler, Kim, and Cecil 2022, 13). Regardless, rural America is impacted by globalization, as influxes of immigrant populations to rural areas are countering rural population decreases and contributing to increased diversity in rural regions around the country. RLIs and RSIs seem to be responding to such globalization trends within the rural communities to which they are connected; the ACE report shared positive results about rural colleges and universities' views of the future of internationalization at their institutions. Thus, it appears that internationalization efforts have become and are likely to stay a more salient priority for RLIs and RSIs.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH, PRACTICE, AND POLICY

Continue to Acknowledge Rurality in Conversations

Overall, rurality remains understudied as a topic in educational research, particularly work focused on higher education (Schafft 2016; Schafft and Biddle 2014; Thier et al. 2021). Emerging scholarship in recent years has begun to discuss the experiences and barriers of rural students accessing and proceeding through postsecondary education. Yet comparatively little is known about rurality from an institutional perspective. To lessen such knowledge gaps, scholars should continue to engage with designs and theoretical frameworks that account for how rurality shows up at the institutional levels via RLIs and RSIs. Similar to research, it will be integral for practitioners and policymakers to consider an institutional understanding of rurality in conversations concerning education and higher education. The absence of this consideration to date has harmed RLIs and RSIs, as education practice and policy efforts have not taken into account the distinct and important work in which such institutions engage (Katsinas and Hardy 2012).

An effective method for acknowledging rurality from an institutional perspective in research, practice, and policy is to consistently classify geographic location of colleges and universities in datasets. As aforementioned, the Carnegie Classifications briefly classified community colleges as rural, urban, or suburban, and IPEDS outlines the location of institutions, such as remote towns or large cities. These efforts have been sporadic and do not appear intentional. Stakeholders involved in IPEDS data and Carnegie listings should carefully and purposefully classify the geography of institutions so that researchers, practitioners, and policymakers can use consistent designations to shape further work around RLIs and RSIs. Additionally, national and regional organizations that conduct multiple large-scale studies of higher education should consider geography of populations and institutions when disseminating surveys and selecting qualitative study sites.

Define Rurality in Studies and Initiatives

Given the number and variety of definitions of what it means to be rural, it will be difficult for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers to push for a standard definition of rurality. Nevertheless, what most definitions of rurality have in common is small populations that are spread across large swaths of land and isolated from densely populated urban locales with more people and buildings (NCES 2022b; Ratcliffe et al. 2016). Rural spaces, RLIs, and RSIs also host populations that are often dominated by working-class and/or land-based industries, including agriculture, manufacturing, and service-based employment. These population and industrial markers will be important for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to consider as they design studies and initiatives inclusive of rurality. Rurality should be defined in each study and initiative, ensuring transparency that they are actually focused on rural regions. Research and efforts will directly target rural populations and communities when they center the factors that they use to define the term rural.

Simultaneously, this review shows that rurality does not look the same across every region and area of the U.S. Being rural can vary by level of rurality, types of industries, and social demographics of locations. Thus, when conducting research and tailoring practice and policy solutions, scholars, practitioners, and policymakers should connect with the communities targeted by such research and practice/policy initiatives. Doing so will ensure that rural-centric scholarship, practice, and policy focus on the local needs and demographics of specific communities and regions. Koricich and colleagues (2020) best expressed these ideas when describing how states should not only work to assist their rural public regional institutions but also take into account specific needs of each rural space, noting that "ultimately, each state must look to their specific context, circumstances, and needs to understand how to best serve these communities, while also looking to other states for examples."

Consider the Many Types of RLIs and RSIs

As scholars work to fill rurality-related gaps in higher education research, further scholarship is specifically needed on RLIs and RSIs (Koricich et al. 2022). Most scholarship in the past two decades on rurality from an institutional perspective has focused particularly on rural community colleges, thus leaving other types of institutions out of the conversation. For example, four-year rural regional institutions—similar to rural community colleges—are beacons of local educational, economic, and cultural development, but they remain understudied (Orphan and McClure 2019). In addition, though most scholarship around RLIs and RSIs has centered on public institutions, but there are private colleges and universities, including more selective institutions, that reside in, near to, or are connected to rural spaces. These institutions operate on different funding models (Koricich et al. 2022) and may or may not have differing priorities and missions. Thus, it will be key for researchers to understand if and how these institutions recruit local students or utilize their teaching and research to serve the surrounding rural communities. Online postsecondary options and participation for rural populations have increased, and nontraditional forms of higher education (e.g., branch campuses, local learning centers, online education) remain population options for rural communities. Given that little literature has analyzed such online and nontraditional institutions and degree offerings, scholars should work to address those knowledge gaps.

Similarly, practice and policy should also account for the breadth of RLIs and RSIs. The stakeholders who determine education practice and policy have largely ignored rurality, therefore limiting efforts tailored directly to RLIs and RSIs. As rural-connected colleges and universities become part of a larger trend in local, state, and federal policymaking conversations, it will be important for practitioners and policymakers to consider what types of RLIs and RSIs are connected to and attended by members of rural communities and populations. These institutions include public and private community colleges, technical colleges, regional institutions, land-grant institutions, dual mission institutions, and other options for postsecondary learning. Many may consider RLIs and RSIs as those colleges and universities that are only located in or by rural areas; however, as Koricich and colleagues' work shows us, institutions can be in other geographic regions and still serve rural communities and populations. Thus, utilizing both rural-located and rural-serving datasets should be a priority.

Understand and Combat Funding Cuts

Scholarship makes it clear that state appropriation cuts, coupled with less revenue from tuition and fees and a lack of federal and grant dollars to RLIs and RSIs have made it difficult for such institutions to conduct their work and fulfill their missions. While researchers were utilizing the most recent data at the time, however, most scholarship in this area has analyzed data from prior years and noted trends from the early 2000s to before the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. It will be important for scholars to update their work as new data becomes available to see if these trends continue to impact RLIs and RSIs. Acquiring and studying such data is key, especially as the COVID-19 pandemic heightened financial woes for RLIs and RSIs (McClure et al. 2021).

Analysis of data trends demonstrates the need for states, the federal government, and private organizations to increase and enhance financial support of RLIs and RSIs. Doing so will take lobbying from higher education stakeholders around the needs of RLIs and RSIs (Koricich et al. 2020). Colleges and universities need funding to be able to

continue to focus on issues of concern to higher education associations, such as fostering internationalization and enhancing access and equity for underserved populations. Additionally, state governments themselves should increase their funding to RLIs and RSIs and ensure that local rural economies—which are already struggling financially—are not shouldering the entire burden of funding postsecondary education. The federal government and private organizations can also create and expand grants uniquely tailored and allocated to rural institutions and communities (Koricich et al. 2022; Orphan and McClure 2019). An example of such tailoring emerged in recent years, as U.S. Department of Education COVID-19 relief funds were distributed through federal funding offered directly to rural institutions and other institutions most impacted by the pandemic (ED 2022). Engaging in such funding efforts at multiple levels and through different sources will aid RLIs and RSIs, which continue to face financial hardship.

Collaborate on Efforts

As researchers, practitioners, and policymakers pursue studying and supporting RLIs and RSIs, it can be helpful for such stakeholders to collaborate with one another in this work. For instance, rural postsecondary researchers attend a rural scholarship meeting at the Association for the Study of Higher Education, as well as run a Slack channel through which they communicate about rural higher education topics and updates. The American Educational Research Association also hosts a Rural Education Special Interest Group, during which rural PreK–12 through postsecondary research is presented. MDC (funded by the Ford Foundation) ran the Rural Community College Initiative from 1994 to 2001. This initiative was founded to "help community colleges in distressed regions move their people and communities toward prosperity. . . . [by] challeng[ing] community colleges to become catalysts for economic development and support[ing] aggressive efforts to increase access to education in rural communities" (MDC 2001). A follow-up to this initiative is now managed by the Southern Rural Development Center and North Central Regional Center for Rural Development. Still operating today is the Rural Community College Alliance, a membership organization that "promote[s] a more economically, culturally, and civically vibrant rural America through advocacy, convening, leveraging resources, and serving as a clearinghouse for innovative practice, policy, and research" (Rural Community College Alliance, n.d.). Further, the Association of Community College Trustees published a recent report titled *Strengthening Rural Community Colleges* (Rush-Marlowe 2021).

Such efforts are also taking place at regional and local levels. As outlined in a 2019 report from the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP), the Horizon Education Alliance—a nonprofit in Elkhart County, Indiana—witnessed local workforce shortages and worked with community partners to develop postsecondary pathways for credentials that would be relevant to those community workforce needs (Davis, Watts, and Ajinkya 2019). That report also describes EcO, a community effort within Columbus in southwest Indiana. EcO collaborates with regional education, business, and community partners to increase both secondary and postsecondary educational attainment through their Powerhouse Credentials Crosswalk. This initiative raises awareness about credential options in high demand from local workforces and offers adult learners in the area broader pathways to pursuing higher education.

These types of national, local, and regional networks and groups can centralize and catalyze efforts of rural researchers, practitioners, and policymakers looking to study and support RLIs and RSIs. For example, Hillman and colleagues' (2021) RLI report was released by the University of Wisconsin–Madison's Student Success Through Applied Research (SSTAR) Lab. SSTAR Lab collaborates with practitioners; as Hillman shared, the lab team is "collecting, managing, and analyzing data with the goal of improving policies and practices to better promote student success—particularly for underrepresented students" (Finkelmeyer 2019). The Koricich and colleagues (2022) RSI report was put out by Appalachian State University's Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges, which "is a research collaborative and resource hub with the mission of increasing appreciation for and understanding of regional colleges and their contributions to opportunity and community wellbeing" (ARRC 2021). RLIs and RSIs could find research, practice, and policy groups and networks helpful for promoting and integrating their efforts. Such efforts could even be coordinated through higher education organizations, which can have units focused on RLIs/RSIs or collaborate with networks, labs, and associations already working on rural-located and rural-serving colleges and universities.

Learn from Those Doing the Work

As scholars, practitioners, and policymakers continue to explore and engage with RLIs and RSIs, it will be helpful to look to those already conducting important work around such rural-located and rural-serving colleges and universities. RLIs and RSIs have for decades contributed to the development and well-being of rural communities and populations. These colleges and universities and their leaders and students know what their institutional, population, and community needs are.

Shasta College, located in the rural upper north region of California, created two programs in hopes of meeting the needs of returning adult students—one that allowed students to pursue an accelerated path to a degree and one that provided students with a home base and supports as they completed online degree programs at other four-year institutions (Davis, Watts, and Ajinkya 2019). South Texas College, located in the Rio Grande valley, offers dual enrollment academies as a community effort not only meeting both local workforce needs but also allowing traditional-aged students options for postsecondary education (Davis, Watts, and Ajinkya 2019). In addition to these programs, dual mission institutions such as Colorado Mountain College (CMC) and Albany State University, located in Georgia, offer many isolated rural communities a local education that allows students to gain certificates, two-year degrees, and four-year degrees more easily and to transition from one type of credential to another (Schindelheim 2022). As CMC's President and Chief Executive Officer Carrie Besnette Hauser stated, dual mission institutions "are most often in rural communities or in places where there aren't a collection of other institutions" (Schindelheim 2022).

Through these efforts and more, it is clear that institutions are already engaging in important work to serve rural populations, particularly the regions and communities to which they are directly connected and for which they care. When higher education organizations design their own research and efforts, they should work directly with RLIs and RSIs in order to see how existing institutional efforts can be duplicated, adapted, or expanded to other areas and colleges and universities. It is also important for organizations to communicate with state congresspeople, higher education leaders, and local community organizations within regions they hope to support in order to ensure that local needs are being met—particularly given the knowledge that not all rural regions are the same.

CONCLUSION

As the world and postsecondary landscape continuously modernizes and changes in the twenty-first century, it is important that we do not disregard rural communities and the higher education institutions that serve them. Ninety-seven percent of U.S. land is classified as rural, and it houses over 19 percent of the U.S. population—almost 60 million Americans. Rural schools alone educate over 9.3 million students. These rural communities and individuals have for too long gone disregarded in postsecondary research, practice, and policy. As higher education organizations seek to lessen the marginalization of rural locales and people from higher education, it is important to acknowledge the challenges and opportunities ahead.

With a society that oftentimes determines how to levy the most benefits for the largest number of people, it can feel difficult to focus research, practice, and policy on a comparatively smaller subset of individuals in the country. That being said, it is the responsibility of ACE and other organizations to advocate on behalf of the millions of people and thousands of rural counties in the country in order to ensure their needs are being met by higher education. This advocacy should include championing RLIs and RSIs, which support rural communities and educate millions of rural students. Doing so will empower rural populations in their postsecondary pursuits and ensure that ACE stays ahead of rural-focused practice and policy decisions and discussions already happening at the institutional, state, and federal levels.

RLIs and RSIs are also key tools for equity when examining the intersections of rurality, social class, age, race, ethnicity, and military status. RLIs and RSIs serve a great number of students from poor and working-class backgrounds; adult learners; military learners; and students of color, including Native and Indigenous, Latinx, and Black students. These students represent populations upon which ACE centers much of their research and advocacy.

As higher education continues to diversify—and as practitioners and policymakers, including ACE, fight to expand postsecondary access—RLIs and RSIs remain important components for providing opportunities to groups of students who have historically been minoritized and marginalized from higher education.

Industries that are common to rural spaces, including agriculture and manufacturing, are declining in modern society; as a result, it will be easy for some to condone leaving rural areas and rural ways of life behind. This thinking is detrimental to people from all walks of life, who need such industries to power and feed an ever-growing world. Further, agriculture, manufacturing, and other technical industries look different than they have before due to the onset of renewable energy and advanced technology. RLIs and RSIs are a key part of such emerging fields, given that these colleges and universities offer a broad variety of credentials from technical certifications to associate degrees to four-year bachelor's and graduate degrees. ACE must remind others of the important role that rurality, RLIs and RSIs play in the growth and futurization of the U.S. and the broader world.

It is clear from decades of postsecondary research, practice, and policy that a higher education degree offers individuals and society a variety of educational, economic, health, and social benefits. Including more rural institutions, and thus the rural populations who benefit from such colleges and universities, in scholarship, practice, and policy efforts will contribute to the betterment of rural populations, their communities, and also the country. If ACE and others who are engaged with research, practice, and policy study and support rural America and the institutions that serve rural regions, we can not only ensure that rural people will benefit from postsecondary education but also that rural communities—and society more broadly—will benefit as well.

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